THE

RECONSTRUCTIONIST

DEDICATED TO THE ADVANCEMENT OF JUDAISM AS A RELIGIOUS CIVILIZATION, TO THE UPBUILDING OF ISRAEL'S ANCIENT HOMELAND, AND TO THE FURTHERANCE OF UNIVERSAL FREEDOM, JUSTICE AND PEACE.

Vol. 1. May 17, 1935—Iyar 14, 5695 No. 10

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THE ELIXIR OF CREATIVE ART

IMPLEMENTING RECONSTRUCTION

MURAL DECORATIONS IN SYNAGOGUES

by Temima Nimtzowitz

THE REDISCOVERY OF JEWISH ART

by Paul Romanoff

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to be held

Monday Evening, May 27, 1935

six-thirty o'clock

at the

Dining Hall in the Brush Building of

THE JEWISH THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

122 Street and Broadway

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THE
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EDITORIALS

Mizrahi Writes a Letter to the Rabbinical Assembly

THE president of the Mizrahi Organization of the United States and Canada, Rabbi Wolf Gold, has issued a broadside against the Rabbinical Assembly of America entitled, "What Would Ezra Say?" It is "an open letter" condemning the Assembly for its endorsement of the Histadrut, the Jewish Workers' Federation of Palestine. Rabbi Gold denies that the Histadrut is "respectful of the traditional practices of their fellow Jews." He charges them with the violation of the traditional rules of Sabbath observance, of ignoring the dietary laws. He describes how horrified Ussishkin was by these defections from tradition on the part of the *halutzim*. He goes so far as to insist that Great Britain "permitted the occurrence of bloody pogroms," "made mockery of the Jewish national aspirations and attempted to crystallize the Jewish developments in Palestine through limiting Jewish immigration and prohibiting the Jewish purchase of land in Palestine"—all because the workers eat *traifa* and because they gave the impression that our "aspirations are of a political and social economic nature."

It is easy enough to pass over with a smile the shrewd political naivete of the last mentioned explanation of Great Britain's behavior. But there is no question that the orthodox Mizrahi is upset by the lack of interest the pioneers betray in *kashrut* and the minutiae of Sabbath observance; and the earnest appeal to the Rabbinical Assembly to repudiate the Histadrut cannot be easily dismissed, for it involves the sincerity of the rabbis who endorsed the Histadrut.

We do not presume to know all the facts. We cannot say whether the workers persecute the traditionalists, or whether they merely ignore them. The Histadrut itself will undoubtedly deal with these charges at the proper time. We do, however, wish to point out that the resolution passed by the Assembly states specifically that they "dissent with irreligion in Palestine or anywhere else. *Nevertheless we insist on our sympathy with the social aspirations of the Histadrut.*" With this stand of the Assembly we agree. If it is true that the workers deliberately make observant Jews uncomfortable in Palestine, mock them or interfere with their fundamental rights to live in accordance with their ritual code, we join in censuring them. But our concern with the Histadrut is not one of traditional observance. We are sympathetic to them because they represent the forces of social righteousness in Palestine.

In this respect, Mizrahi apparently shares our views. They too "have always taken great pride in the program and work of the *Ha'poel Ha'Mizrahi* (the Mizrahi workers); and these Mizrahi workers "have concluded with the latter (the Histadrut) an understanding concerning matters of economic import." If Mizrahi can cooperate with the Histadrut in economic matters, certainly the rabbis are doing no wrong in expressing their sympathy with the "social aspirations of the Histadrut."

Furthermore, it should be made clear that not only the members of the Histadrut violate traditional codes of ritual law. Ussishkin, whom Rabbi Gold quotes, said, "Palestine Jewry, in its overwhelming numbers, the workers as well as other circles, has . . . been cutting itself loose from the vital root of Jewish tradition." If that is the case, if the indifference to Jewish tradition is characteristic of "Palestine Jewry" as a whole, why single out the Histadrut for condemnation?

We are trying very hard to be absolutely fair to Mizrahi, but we somehow cannot help but observe that this attack upon the Histadrut appears just about when Zionists are preparing to go to the polls to elect delegates to the coming Zionist Congress, and that Mizrahi has previously shown signs of flirting with Revisionism. We should like not to think so, but the open letter seems to us to be just a wee bit like partisan electioneering.

The Elixir of Creative Art

ONE of the most vital distinctions between the philosophy of Judaism as a civilization and prevailing versions of Judaism lies in the attitude toward the *raison d'etre* of Jewish life. Since the emancipation, Jewish philosophers have strained to justify the existence and persistence of the Jewish people on the grounds of some purpose that the Jewish people can and should achieve, some contribution that they can make to civilization. In one form or another, each official version of Judaism proposes some mission that we as Jews are destined to perform. But from the point of view of Judaism as a civilization, the Jewish people has no more need to justify itself to the world than an individual has the need to prove that he ought not to be summarily executed because he has not something important to give to the world. As long as the will to live continues in a group, that group deserves life.

A further parallel, however, exists between the individual and the group in regard to the attitude toward self. In order to be well adjusted and normal, an individual must find some purpose and meaning and joy in his own life. He must not come to feel that his life is wasted, that his existence amounts to no more than a dull routine punctuated by sorrow. He wants to make the most of himself. A group, like an individual, needs some activity which brings its own enriching reward. It requires absorption in some kind of experience to which argumentation or justification is irrelevant. Such is the experience of creative art; it is its own reward. The creative experience is an ultimate, not necessarily a utilitarian phenomenon. The life of a group that produces such creative expression becomes inherently interesting and worthwhile. The criterion of health in any civilization is the extent to which it stimulates creativity, and the extent to which the results of such creativity are joyously received by the constituents of that civilization as the genuine outgrowth of their lives and interests.

For this reason we welcome the beautiful murals of Temima Nimtzowitz, reproduced elsewhere in this issue, as an encouraging sign of recuperation in Jewish life. Their presence in the synagogue of The Society for the Advancement of Judaism will prove to be more potent than any apologetic of Judaism. These paintings of "Old and New Elements in Modern Palestine" are an in-

crement to Jewish values which render Jewish life so intrinsically worthwhile as to extinguish all morbid doubts and self-questionings. We sincerely hope that these murals will set in operation the creative talents of other Jewish artists; that other institutions which house Jewish activities will see the infinite possibilities that inhere in the beautifying of their edifices. We are a people fabulously wealthy in untapped resources of creative art. If Jewish life would make it possible for more and more young Jews to give artistic expression to their Jewish experience, we would destroy that brooding introspection which now gnaws at our hearts.

Implementing Reconstruction

WITH this issue of the RECONSTRUCTIONIST, the editors usher out the season. The announced plans call for twenty issues a year; ten have appeared, and in the fall, when publication is resumed, the second half of the year's quota will be filled. This is naturally the time to look back, and to look forward.

Looking back upon the last four months of our modest project, we are heartened. Hindered as we have been by a precarious income from limited sources, we have not been able to indulge in extensive advertising or in concentrated soliciting of subscriptions. The men and women who constitute our regular reading public are the people who, on the receipt of a single announcement or sample copy, have forwarded their subscriptions. Those who have not responded have not been approached a second time. Without desiring to flatter anyone, we do not hesitate to conjecture that we number among our subscribers many Jews of influence, rabbis, teachers, educators, and lay leaders whose words and action carry weight in Jewish life. They are Jews who reach the ears of numbers of their fellow-Jews and we therefore assume that our contribution to American Jewish ideology is thereby enhanced.

We are further heartened by the response of the Anglo-Jewish press. The gentlemen of the press have found it worthwhile to reckon with our views. Sometimes they have censured us; sometimes they have expressed their agreement and approval. In any case, they have heard what they consider to be an authentic voice in Jewish life.

Looking forward now, we see many possibilities for the RECONSTRUCTIONIST to serve a high purpose in American Jewish life. Armed with a clearly formulated philosophy of Judaism and fortified by a carefully thought out program, we venture to challenge the complacency of our people with Jewish things as they are. We strive to be critical, but not detached; objective but not remote. We stir self-criticism in the interests of a functioning and wholesome Jewish life, for ourselves as well as for others. But self-criticism without a positive point of view can lead to morbidity and despair; we feel the strength of a cogent philosophy, and self-criticism only goads us on to more intensive efforts.

Because we feel that way, we believe that those who have taken this magazine to heart must feel that way too. Therein lies their power for good. Whatever their affiliation, synagogue, temple, lodge, club, Zionist group, classroom, philanthropic society, union, they can in turn become imbued with the resolve to shake Jewish life from its inner lethargy. They can constitute the vanguard of the forces of reconstruction.

If, however, they attempt to work alone, they are liable to be discouraged. They must band together in their respective locales. Clubs should be formed—call them *Reconstructionist Clubs*, perhaps—similar to clubs organized around other, weekly or monthly publications, for the purpose of reading and discussing each issue, and planning how their fellow Jews

can be made to feel the impact of the RECONSTRUCTIONIST'S philosophy and program.

The organization of such clubs may be the practical outcome of the forthcoming *Reconstructionist Dinner* that is to be held in New York on Monday evening, May 27th, at the Jewish Theological Seminary. We hope that the symposium of that evening will elicit some ideas along those lines and will pave the way for action which will translate the ideal of a reconstructed American Jewish life into a reality.

Mural Decorations in Synagogues

By TEMIMA NIMTZOWITZ

I

SYNAGOGUES have been conspicuously deficient in their decorations in the use of pictorial representations of the human figure. The same is true of the decorations in Moslem places of worship. The case of the church, however, has been very different. Ecclesiastical art has always been favored with a warm reception on the part of church and laity. Many of the world's most meritorious art treasures have been cherished for centuries under the roof of a church, monastery or convent. The tremendous art activity during the Renaissance was created, in a large degree, by the encouragement offered artists by church and state. Artists were given every opportunity to beautify nave and cloister. The life of Jesus and the saints was depicted in innumerable media, foremost among which were mosaic, fresco and marble. To this day visitors flock to the churches of Italy to gaze reverently upon the mural paintings by some of the most gifted artists of all periods—Giotto, Fra Angelico, Mossaccio. These and other masters did their work unhampered by church restriction.

On the other hand, the ban against the representation of human or animal forms as expressed in the biblical commandment, "Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth," (Exodus 20:4) has been largely responsible for the lack of paintings in Jewish places of worship. Most of the decorations took the form of fruit, floral or geometric designs. However, recent excavations of synagogues in Palestine are witnesses to the illuminating fact that the biblical prohibition was not always strictly adhered to. Professor E. L. Sukenik, in "Ancient Synagogues of Palestine and Greece," attempts to explain this fact by maintaining that there were certain periods of laxity in the enforcement of the biblical prohibition on the part of communal authorities, who interpreted the commandment as being a prohibition against the use of human and animal forms for purposes of worship only, and not necessarily against their use for decoration.

In such periods art flourished considerably. Motifs including figures of human beings and animals were introduced into decorations for home and synagogue along with the accepted floral and geometric motifs. However, when a reaction set in (as was usually the case after a period of leniency) and stern voices rose in loud reprimand, these undesirable elements were quickly and mercilessly effaced and

mutilated while the accepted ones were allowed to remain intact. Such a period of purification would very often be followed by a wave of liberalism. It is for this reason that archaeological findings have brought to light numerous mural and floor decorations containing pictorial representations of human and animal figures, as well as the forms of fish and fowl. Subject matter was frequently derived from biblical sources, while the signs of the zodiac were featured a number of times as the central theme of a floor decoration. Most of the designs are executed in mosaic, although mention is made in a recently discovered Talmudic source of the existence of mural paintings. None, however, have yet been unearthed in Palestinian synagogues, although colored traces can be discerned on the walls of a few of the recently excavated synagogues. But a wealth of murals in fresco was found in a synagogue dating back to 250 C.E., dug up at Dura on the Euphrates River, by a joint expedition from Yale University and some European institutions. The frescoes reveal abundance of biblical and Jewish festival material elaborately painted and very beautiful in design and color. Full length figures are an important feature of the paintings. An elaborate book with numerous plates on the murals of Dura is in the process of completion by Professor Carl H. Kraeling, of Yale.

One of the best preserved of the Palestinian synagogues was excavated in 1929 at Beth Alpha in the Valley of Esdraelon by Professor Sukenik. The mosaic pavement is almost completely intact, showing that that particular synagogue had probably been abandoned before the enforcers of the Law made their appearance. The subject matter is varied, dealing with the story of the sacrifice of Isaac, the zodiacal signs, the four seasons and numerous ceremonial objects. The style shows the influence of Alexandrian craftsmen then living in Palestine who were called upon to execute the designs. Decorations in synagogues of other periods show startling Byzantine and Graeco-Roman influence confirming the theory that the Hebrews always absorbed the culture of their neighbors and conquerors.

Another synagogue which apparently had been abandoned before the mutilation of its decorations is the one at Jerash in Transjordania, where it was dug up from beneath the remains of a Byzantine church. The story of the Flood executed in mosaics shows the touch of superb craftsmanship. Evidently the community was well able to hire skilled workers because the designs excel in their artistic merit. The heads of two of Noah's sons, Shem and Japhet, and figures of the animals are still recognizable. The other figures probably existed but are completely missing now.

At Ain Duk near Jericho another synagogue has been excavated. The region surrounding the site is very rich in multicolored stones. These were used extensively in the lovely mosaic floor. The center of the decoration features a figure symbolizing the sun. Four other figures portray the four seasons. Daniel in the lions' den fills another panel. The floor is in an excellent state of preservation. As time passed, however, although faithful adherence to the restriction wore off, the custom to refrain from representing human beings in synagogue decoration continued.

In modern times, with the expanding of the synagogue from merely a place of worship to a place of assembly for forums, recitals and meetings of all kinds, the attitude toward the decorations on its walls is also undergoing a broadening process. The variety of subject matter at the disposal of the artist is infinite, covering the whole range of human and Jewish aspirations throughout the ages and at the present time. The Jewish artist has a vast field for creative work.

CENTER PANEL OF TH

Photo by J. Schneider

LEFT PANEL OF THE UNTERBERG MEMORIAL MURAL

II

In keeping with the philosophy of The Society for the Advancement of Judaism which sees the survival of Judaism only in its creativity and its power to reinterpret and revitalize Jewish tradition, I was called upon to paint a mural for its synagogue in memory of Israel Unterberg, one of the founders of the Society. Having but recently returned from an eight month's visit to Palestine, I chose as my subject "Old and New Elements in Modern Palestine." The approach I used was based on an incident which happened on one of my trips through the Emek. In a field I saw a *halutz* at work, and stopped to speak with him. The sun was mercilessly hot. He rested for a few minutes from his hard work and explained a number of things to me. When I asked him what machinery he used in the field, he held out his hands, palms up. They were rough and calloused; the hands of a worker. "These are my machines," he said, "with them I helped build our colony." My eyes followed the direction of his as they swept with pride across the fields, the huts, the sheds, the barns, and lingered an instant most lovingly as they

MEMORIAL MURAL

Photo by J. Schneide

lit on the new school building just completed. In it his child was busy at his studies. His gaze continued its tour of the surroundings, and then returned to me. "Yes," he repeated, "these are my machines—and that is why I am so content." I looked at the hands. They were the hands of a worker indeed, strong and broad and developed; but the face beaming down upon these hands was fine and sensitive, despite the many layers of skin, hardened and toughened by sun and wind. What a wonderful theme to develop in a painting, I mused: the joy of creating with one's hands, at once the crudest and most developed of all tools. It conjured up a picture of hands digging into the soil, hands sowing, hands weeding, hands gathering in the harvest. Even though machines of steel and iron break the barren soil of Palestine, scatter seeds into innumerable furrows, and hasten the ingathering season by producing tremendous results in a limited time, the greatest joy comes to the worker when together with his companions he tends the flourishing vegetable plots, picks oranges and packs grapes. His voice rises in song as his hands move quickly, rhythmically. Economic, political crises arise and

Photo by J. Schnei

RIGHT PANEL OF THE UNTERBERG MEMORIAL MURA

pass, but the voice of the worker heedlessly continues its catchy tune and his hands continue rhythmically to move over the fragrant fruit.

The opportunity to develop this theme came quickly. The central panel of the mural in the synagogue of The Society for the Advancement of Judaism expresses this idea. Emphasis is laid upon the manual labors of the Palestinian men and women as they work in the banana plantations, orange groves, vineyards, and wheatfields during the ingathering season. It attempts to show the abundance and fertility of the Emek where agricultural experiments of all kinds are being undertaken by organized labor. The panel is slightly prophetic in outlook. It furnishes the affirmative ending for a Palestinian song—which closes with "We have already plowed and also sown, but we have not yet reaped."

The panel would change it to "We have already plowed, and also sown, and now we reap our harvest."

For the last few decades Palestine has undergone a process of complete rejuvenation. It has become a youthful country. That is why the men and women portrayed in the mural are young and strong. They wear the comfortable, informal attire of the worker in the field, shorts and shirts and overalls. Blue is a favorite color, because as a cool color it serves as a refreshing contrast to the yellow heat or perhaps because it echoes the sky. White sunhats protect the workers from the scorching sun. Little do they realize how charming a picture they present to the eye of the casual passerby. White and blue spots dot the landscape, affording gracious relief to the monotonous green fields in the Emek. The activities of the *Halutzim* are numerous. The rising and setting sun defines the temporal boundaries of their work day. Even though they are enthusiastic and spirited, they approach their work with great seriousness. "Time is short, and much must be accomplished." The limited span of a day offers very little opportunity for relaxation. In the mural the illusion of activity is attained through the all-over pattern created by the groups of workers. The eye glides from group to group, and back again. Accents of white help further to create an illusion of activity.

This central panel, almost twenty feet long, and five feet high, is flanked on either side by two vertical panels, each measuring eight feet in height and five feet in width. The panel to the right deals with many of the old elements still very conspicuous in modern Palestinian life. It takes the form of a composition which allows for the inclusion of varied subject matter within the confines of one area. Let us see just what these subjects are: In the upper right hand corner is the old city of Tiberias. An Arab oarsman rowed me out on the Sea of Galilee so that I could make some sketches of this ancient city. This particular aspect of the city has changed considerably since I made the sketches because only a few weeks later the devastating flood of 1934 occurred and wrought havoc with these ageless hovels. The old city of Tiberias now lies in ruins. Next to it on the mural we see two money changers. When I reached Palestine in December, 1933, I hardly expected to find these types still existing. Created by an ill-fated destiny and through no fault of theirs they persist and manage to ply a thriving trade. They usually function in pairs. Their mien most ardently bespeaks their character. It is not difficult to see that the one to the right is the more aggressive of the two, and completely dominates his "colleague."

In striking contrast to these is the group of ecstatic Hasidim emerging from the white domes of Meiron which is in the northern part of Palestine. Meiron is the site of the tomb of Rabbi Simeon bar Yochai. On Lag B'Omer the Hasidim assemble there to pay

homage to his memory. They commemorate the festival with song and dance. Here they are shown dressed in traditional garb, dancing with the Holy Scroll in the usual attitudes of joy and ecstacy. *Shammos, Katzev, and Rebbi* have become identified with the cosmic source. They no longer exist on the physical plane; according to their beliefs, they have mingled with the Infinite. This group leads directly to the Wailing Wall, with three Jews at prayer. Their backs are bowed. They cannot get close enough to the moss-covered crevices, the remnant of their ancient glory. To the left through the arches one catches a glimpse of the old city of Safed. Just below, the children of the Yeshiva sit at their studies, subject to traditional methods of instruction. From their gestures and attire one can see that they are very definitely following in the footsteps of their grandfathers, dancing so ecstatically up above. At the bottom right a motley crowd passes through the narrow arched streets of the old city of Jerusalem. First we see an Arab vendor. In his basket he carries oranges. For one piastre he will sell you ten of them; that is, if it is the orange season. If, however, it is not, you may have to pay three piastres for one, and be satisfied. It adds zest to the transaction and "with the closing of the deal" both vendor and buyer experience a feeling of great accomplishment. The two men at the bottom center have been engrossed in a very heated discussion dealing no doubt with the interpretation of a particular text in the Talmud which the one carries under his arm. The argument has from all appearances been going on for quite a long time, and there is no doubt but that the gentleman to the right has just about tried the patience of his friend to the point of exhaustion. The mingled expression of resentment, pain and confusion on the face of the latter bespeaks the outburst which will inevitably come, but from which we fortunately have been spared by lack of space. A Bukharian woman, all glowing and rosy, trips primly along the irregular cobble stones. She is jostled by Arabs. Donkeys rub up against her. But when she emerges from the crowd, she is just as glowing and rosy and prim as when first she entered.

The panel to the left is the direct opposite of its sister panel. It deals with new elements in modern Palestine. The builder is the important factor, from whom everything radiates. His is the strong, youthful, mental type. Nevertheless, his hand grasps the tool with the confidence and power of a tried and experienced worker. Palestine is full of these laborers now. There the builder is a most honored member of society because it is he who is laying the foundation of the land's future great cities. His fellow workers prepare the material for the new buildings that rise almost over night in the speedy program of reconstruction. Their work is hard and tedious, but the purpose for which they labor brings a smile to their lips. Even the burden of lumber that one of them carries on his back loses its weight in the face of the ideal to which he is helping give concrete form.

It is through the efforts of these workers too that the city of Haifa (seen in the upper left hand corner of the panel) rises out of the Mediterranean to climb the heights and beauties of Mount Carmel. The new port describes a sweeping arc in the rich blue sea which gives shelter and protection to the ships of many nations. These laborers, too, built the University and Library that grace the olive dotted Mount Scopus. Students below are shown at their studies. They sit at ease. Their instructor inspired by his profession is young and enthusiastic. He is a guide rather than a pedant. Gently and firmly his hand rests on the shoulder of his pupil who, feeling the power of his touch, continues his studies with keener appre-

ciation. To the left a group of men and women are intently engrossed in the fascinations ever present in scientific research. The professor helps the novice. The microscope reveals its wonders and new progress in the fields of science is made in the old world. The two mains at the right are a suggestion of the Ruttenberg Electrical Works at Tel Or. The young guide who explained the functions of the huge dynamos to a group of us visiting the plant showed how the light power of the entire land was controlled at one switch board. The workers at Tel Or have their own settlement within the precincts of the power plant, their life tied up entirely with their work.

To the left of the central workers we see the Haifa Technicum which is one of Palestine's most highly developed educational institutions. There, during the festival of Shabuot the *Bikkurim* or first fruits are brought at the end of the exciting street carnival, to be sold for the benefit of the Jewish National Fund. Floats decorated gaily with greens of every kind, from each agricultural colony come riding into the huge front court of the Technicum. They empty their wares on to ready-made stands and soon the fresh fruit, vegetables, eggs, jams, baskets of berries and goodies of all kinds are auctioned off to the highest bidder for the sake of augmenting the fund that helps redeem the land. The spirit of gaiety, light heartedness and carefreeness that abounds among the holiday throng cannot be duplicated in gatherings of Jews in any other country of the world. The base of this panel is stirred into spirited activity by the marching of a group of enthusiastic singing youth. They are dressed in various shades of blue, the worker's color. Their skin is ruddy, their eyes brilliant and sparkling. A spirit of comradeship pervades them all as they step in unison. They know that Jewry looks to them to carry on the great work of rebuilding, and they progress in their purpose with heads high and a song on their lips.

The subject of this mural "Old and New Tendencies in Modern Palestine" might have been approached from many other points of view. A historical, and political attitude might have been developed, and may color the themes of future mural paintings. In this case, however, the bitterness of controversy, the clash of arms, the impermanency of party ascendencies were all set aside because one man, the symbol of all Palestinian workers, held out his hands and said—"These are my machines".

Murals should occupy a definite place in the architectural layout of a synagogue. At The Society for the Advancement of Judaism, the panels are placed on the south wall, over and flanking the two large entrance doors. Although they have considerable depth, they are painted on a two dimensional plane and do not in any way violate the primary law of mural painting: that, above all, it is a decoration and should take its place on the wall as such. It is the hope of those interested in the development of Jewish creative activities that more efforts will be made in the future to beautify the walls of Jewish places of worship and assembly. There is a definite place for synagogue decoration in our day, just as there was in the days when our forefathers gathered multicolored stones to form mosaic panels that still persist to our day, though much else has perished with the past.

The Rediscovery of Jewish Art

By PAUL ROMANOFF*

THE Jew has been credited with noble achievement in almost every branch of human enterprise. He has able representatives in science, in industry, education, and in all the professions. But in the field of fine art alone he has neither claimed nor been awarded any particular recognition. Is it indeed not strange that a people so emotional, a people of so romantic a past, a people that composed the Song of Songs and that painted the magic imageries of the Bible should not have found primary expression in fine art? How strange that a people so rich in and fond of folklore should not have been able to depict this treasure in painting.

It has long been commonly accepted that because of the prohibition laid down in the Second Commandment, the Jews could not have developed a specific Jewish art, nor could they even have contributed to the world's treasure of art. Consequently, it has been taken for granted that whatever unimportant manifestations of art were found among the Jews bear the influence of Christian art.

It has never occurred to anyone that the very reverse of this is true. Astounding as this may seem and despite the havoc which it will work with age-old opinions, this fact is nevertheless established beyond doubt by the archaeological discoveries conducted jointly by Yale University and the French Academy at Dura-Europos, Syria, by the Hebrew University and former excavations of the ancient synagogues in Palestine and Transjordania. What they have brought to light opens a new chapter in the history of art, which must result in the rewriting of the history of Christian art, and bring about a revaluation of traditional conceptions of Jewish art.

The recent discovery of the synagogue at Dura reveals that in the third century C.E. there was a highly developed Jewish art, which influenced the Western Christian world, though the latter was not aware of it.

"There are eleven complete frescoes and six in fragments which were painted about 244 A.D., revealing that Christian church art borrowed from the Jewish its style, composition and subject matter," reads the report of the field-director, Professor Clark Hopkins. "This sensational discovery . . . is of great importance for the study of the Bible, the history of Judaism and, first and foremost, for the history of the early development of Christian art," wrote Professor Michael I. Rostovtzeff, of Yale University.

It is not difficult to understand the basis for the opinion of those critics who have maintained that there is no Jewish art. The prohibition of the Second Commandment offers adequate explanation. What is more, because of the persistent Jewish struggle against idolatry, the same sentiment is re-echoed frequently in the Bible.

Even as late as the first century of the common era, we find Josephus Flavius speaking of the strong Jewish resistance to anything that approximated a violation of the spirit of the Second Commandment. When Herod the Great was deathly sick, two Jewish scholars hastened to tear down the golden eagle from over the main gateway to the Temple area, which the former had placed there. A similar incident occurred when at Pilate's command there were secretly brought into Jerusalem the Roman banners which bore the likeness of the Emperor. Jews by the thousands went to Pilate and prostrated themselves on

* Curator of the Museum of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

the ground and remained there for five days and five nights. When they were surrounded by the Roman soldiers, the Jews stretched forth their necks ready to receive the sharp blade. Still another incident is told by Josephus. Petrunius, the Roman governor, was ready to execute the command of the Emperor Gaius Ceasar to place his (Caesar's) statue in the Temple. The Jews went *en masse* to Acco to plead with him not to violate their law which not only forbade the erection of human statuary in the Temple but even anywhere else in Palestine.

II

What happened in Jewish life and what affected Jewish religious conceptions to have brought about a revolutionary reversal of the Jewish attitude, so as to permit the development of Jewish art?

A glance at the ancient world will enable one to understand the importance and implication of the Second Commandment, from the monotheistic point of view. The peoples of that time were fetish and idol worshippers. The idols and other objects of worship of that period had plastic forms, relief and bas-relief. The Second Commandment was aimed at the abolition of idol worship; hence, the modeling of any plastic forms was regarded as having for its sole purpose worship of those forms. This Commandment forbade the making of graven images and any manner of likeness, i.e. both theriomorphic and anthropomorphic. This action, intended to emphasize the monotheistic idea, was enforced more than half a millenium before our common era, when the pantheons of Babylon and Egypt, not excluding the deities of the Canaanites and other small nations, contained these forms of statuary.

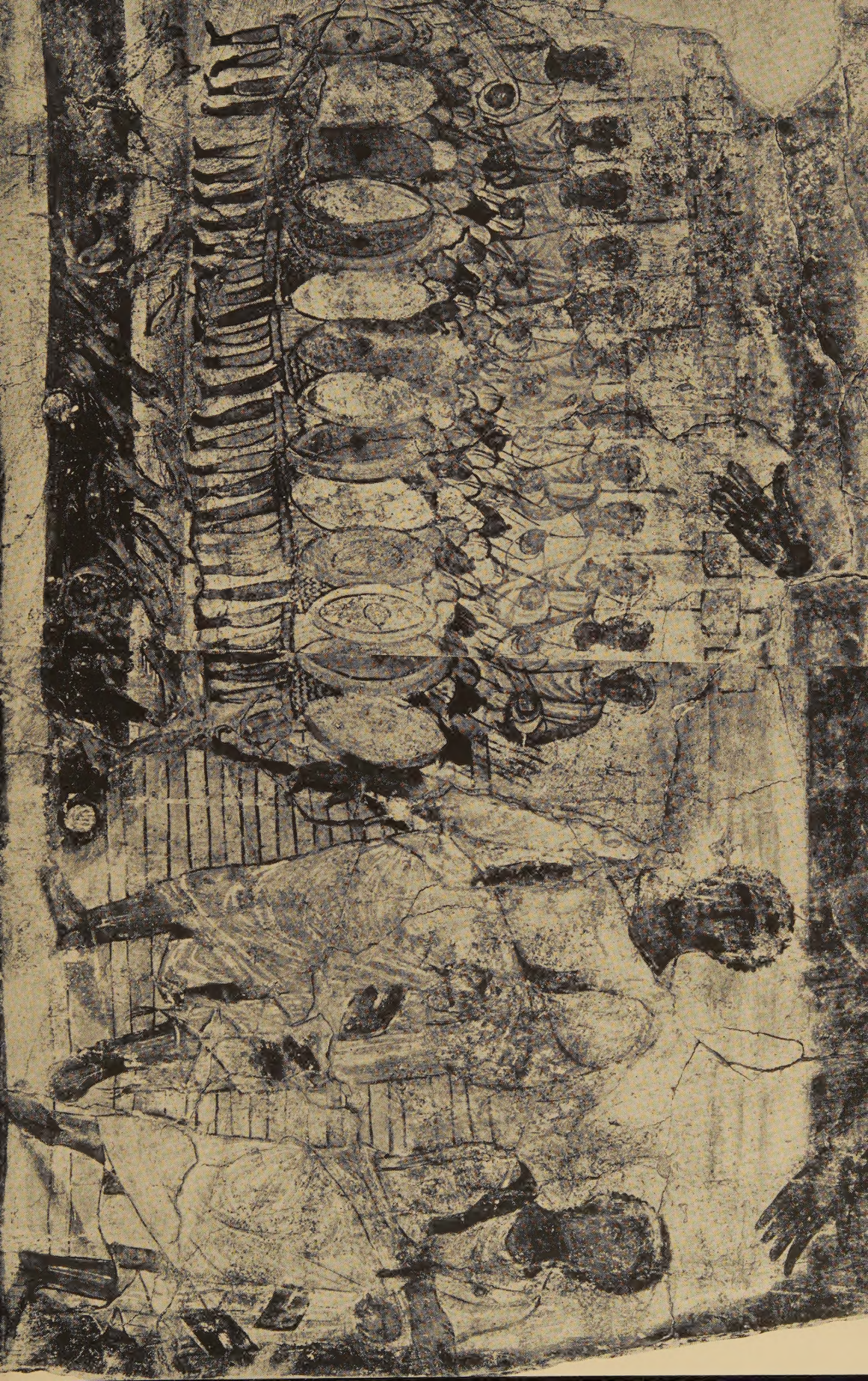
The importance of this taboo is easily understood. The Israelites upon entering Canaan, though possessing the conception of YHWA, still practised idolatry for a number of generations. The enforcement of the prohibition against making or worshipping idols caused the constant battle against idolatry as related in the Bible.

Centuries passed. During that period ancient geographic boundaries changed, and with it religious conceptions. When the Graeco-Roman culture spread over the ancient world, the cult became more and more definitely anthropomorphic. With the general abandonment of the theriomorphic worship, the Jewish ban against making plastic forms of birds and animals was automatically eased. It was then not considered a violation of the law if they were made for ornamental purposes.

This new leniency can be observed in the difference in attitude toward idol worship taken by Jewish law in the time of the First, and in the time of the Second Temples. During the First Temple the Jews still practised idolatry, while during the time of the Second Temple, and especially towards its end, Judaism was so deeply rooted that it could even withstand the loss of the Temple. The Mishna and Talmud in discussing the use of idols (in human forms) no longer concern themselves with idol worship proper, but with the problem of whether these idols may be put to practical (non-idolatrous), or ornamental purposes.

The fundamental basis for the enforcement of the law regarding plastic forms during the Second Temple is not to be found in the Jewish practice, but in external conditions—the worship of the neighboring nations. As long as the outside world with whom the Jews came into contact practised a certain form of idolatry, this same form was forbidden to the Jews. With the discarding of the worship of certain gods and idols, the restriction of modeling similar forms would be eased and the interpretation of the law would be amended to this effect.

The origin of Christian art has been traced by some to the Graeco-Roman art in the West, and by others to the Syrian pagan art in the East. Even a decade



ago, scholars considered the murals of a pagan temple, excavated in the same city Dura, to be the prototype of the Christian churches in the East. No one could have foreseen that a few hundred paces from the pagan temple was hidden a Jewish synagogue which would produce the key to the origin of Christian art.

Early art among the Hebrews was mainly centered in the synagogues. The objects of art had the nature of embellishment, some being of a folk-loric character. The subjects were biblical and known to every Jew. The murals were biblical illuminations, and the mosaics Jewish ornaments and motifs. But Christianity, having to seek its proselytes in the Graeco-Roman world, where art was a religious expression of worship, and not being familiar with the biblical traditions, might have attributed a divine character to the murals, in which the Jewish artist saw only a folk-loric theme. This may be the reason for the phenomenon that the Christian cult image was in fact generally, and especially in primitive times, a work of painting, not of sculpture.

Until the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries there was no specific Christian art. The subject, motif and style were Jewish, for the early Christians were also Jews. The Jewish Christians, having the Jewish tradition, naturally would not dare reproduce the likeness of their teachers. If this be the case, this would suggest that the portraits of the Apostles and others were either copied from frescoes of Jewish synagogues, or were the result of the imagination of later Christian artists.

None of the other countries suffered so many political changes as Palestine. This proved to be fatal to archaeological research. Palestine was a tramping-ground for many nations, each one zealously destroying the work and sacred places of its predecessors. This may account for the meager yield of Palestinian soil to the archaeologist. The synagogues excavated in Palestine and Transjordania could not supply us with many remnants of interior decorations; only floor mosaics depicting the signs of the zodiac, ceremonial objects and human figures have been found. The mosaics suggest that frescoes and other forms of decorative art were a common feature.

Had Christianity taken its course through the countries lying south of Palestine, Christian art, as Christianity itself, would undoubtedly have taken a much different form. Fortunately for art, it went to the North and to Europe. But we see in later Jewish art the influence of both the North and the South. Originally Jewish cultural centers were in Palestine, Syria and Babylon. There they had a developed art; frescoes, mosaics, and other ornaments in which the human figure, or full scenes from the Bible, were common features. This we find later adopted in Christian art. With the rise of Islam, the Jews living under their sovereignty practised only those forms of ornamentation peculiar to Islamic countries, such as floral designs, arabesques, and the like. The western Jews continued in manuscripts, the art which originally was displayed in their synagogues, in murals and frescoes. This paralleled the Christian development, not in artistic value, but in motif.

To illustrate, we see the illuminated manuscript from Yemen, Egypt and Northern Africa contain ornamentation which is similar to that found in the Korans. The manuscripts of Spain, France, Italy, Germany and Holland, on the other hand, possess not only ornaments, but miniatures similar to the Christian illuminated books.

If until now there have been many who wondered whether there is an art which may be called "Jewish," these discoveries dispel all doubt. Moreover, this art was not insignificant, since it influenced the so-called Christian art, in the cultivation of which were enlisted the services of world-renowned schools and artists. Jewish art never died. If on account of persecutions and iconography it did not flourish, as did Christian art, it still survived in the synagogues, manuscripts and ceremonial objects.